DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 468 480 CG 031 933

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TITLE	A 9-11 Perspective: "Connect for Kids" Editor Susan Phillips Interviews Robin Goodman. Connect for Kids: Guidance for Grown-Ups.
INSTITUTION	Benton Foundation, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	2002-10-00
NOTE	7p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Connect for Kids, 1625 K St., NW, 11th Floor, Washington, DC, 20006. For full text: http://www.connectforkids.org/.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Child Psychology; *Children; *Coping; Counseling; Interviews; *Terrorism

ABSTRACT

As a child psychologist based at New York University in Manhattan, Dr. Robin Goodman is well-placed to understand the myriad ways children have been affected by the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, and the many strategies they have found to cope or to avoid dealing with the trauma. This article presents an interview with Dr. Goodman in which he urges the benefits of listening and watching for clues as to how kids are coping--and recommended some ways to ease children's fears. (GCP)

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A 9-11 Perspective

Connect for Kids Editor Susan Phillips Interviews Robin Goodman

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A 9-11 Perspective

Connect for Kids Editor Susan Phillips interviews Robin Goodman

As a child psychologist based at New York University in Manhattan, Dr. Robin Goodman is well-placed to understand the myriad ways children have been affected by the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, and the many strategies they have found to cope or to avoid dealing with the trauma.

In a recent conversation with Connect for Kids Editor Susan Phillips, Goodman urged the benefits of listening and watching for clues as to how kids are coping—and recommended some ways to ease children's fears.

What advice can you offer parents and others about children's exposure to media coverage of the September 11th anniversary?

What happens is, any kid has the potential to re-experience it through the media. Those most at risk are those who were close to it or are personally affected. But even for those who were not directly affected, just watching it could be problematic. We know media exposure has the potential to increase stress in kids. If a kid had a problem before, for whatever reason—for instance, from having watched the television coverage of last year's attack repeatedly—they could have these re-experiencing symptoms.

You might see symptoms or behaviors similar to whatever you saw the first time. It depends on the severity and the kind of problem the child was having initially. They might replay the event over and over in their memory. They might have nightmares. Whether the images came from experience, or from the media, they are real.

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What role does age play in children's ability to handle this renewed focus on the tragedy?

Kids under 11 are more at risk. Parents often underestimate the effects of trauma of this type on kids of this age…part of that is because kids don't have the language or cognitive abilitities to describe what they are going through…Older kids have more options for managing their feelings.

Even if a child is not exposed to much media coverage of the anniversary, what else might trigger anxiety or other strong feelings?

One kid I know who has been fine until now, found that going to buy school stuff brought it back to mind, and said "You know, I hope we don't have to wear those gas masks again this year."

There's definitely an association of the new school year with this. It's a trigger, and we have to be careful about this.

What should parents be on the look-out for, if they are concerned that their child is making that association between the start of the school year and the terrorist attacks?

Look for symptoms of anxiety, depression, stress. For a child who suffered a personal loss, or was really traumatized by the event, parents will want to make sure that they communicate with their child's teacher or teachers. It's a new year, a new teacher, maybe a new school, and maybe not everyone is prepared to be sensitive to the child's loss or whatever difficulties they may have with this anniversary.

For parents and guardians of children who lost someone close in the attacks, what kind of information should they be sharing with a new teacher?

Aboslutely, parents should inform the new teacher of how the child has been doing. It's good to have an identified person in the class that child knows they can go to if they're having a hard time that day.

They should warn teachers about changes in the family. Maybe mom is working this year, because before, dad worked. Everybody has to decide how much should be public, and how much private. Kids should be included in that decision.

Parents might want to discuss with their children what kinds of things will they share with the other kids. It can be helpful for other kids to understand about bereavement, being sensitive to that. Role-playing can be helpful, practicing saying things like, "I'm feeling sad today."

Surely there is some emotional benefit that can come from marking this anniversary?

It's not that you want to avoid the reminders, but that you want to have some choice and say about them. Showing the buildings falling down again and burning and people running and screaming, is not about remembering important people from your life—and that's where the focus should be.

Anniversaries happen all the time, for good things and for not so good things. Every first day of school, every birthday, every wedding. What we usually do is remember the event. Kids going back to school think about all the things that happened the year before, how much they learned, what was good, what wasn't. They also look to the present and the future: I grew three inches, I learned to ride a bike. This year we get to study geometry. In the same way, kids can be encouraged to look at how far we have come since last year. They can ask themselves, "How did I make it through such a tough time? What kinds of changes do I want to make?"

As schools plan ways to mark the date, what should they be aware of?

I think schools have to be really careful about providing a regular structure for the day, a regular routine. If they choose to have some kind of acknowledgement, whether it's class-wide or subject-based, it would be good to include choice. For instance, some students might choose to participate in a related art project. But some kids will not be able to tolerate that, and others will feel, I'm fine, I don't need to do this. That should be

accommodated. If there's a moment of silence, it can be suggested that some students might want to think about the year ahead and what they would like to see happen, rather than to look back.

In conjunction with the anniversary, of course, we're hearing a lot on the news about the war on terrorism and the directions that might take. Is that increasing the anxiety level for some kids?

Absolutely. If you think that's the case in your home, then read the news with them, ask them questions about what they read, and correct misinformation. If they are getting anxious, you can search out information together, they can make a choice about how much they want to know or not know.

There are different kinds of people. Some of us are information seekers and some of us are information avoiders. That's not the same as phobic avoidance of something that's too painful, it's just that for some of us, too much information makes us anxious. For others, the more they know, the more they understand, the more they feel like they can master the situation.

We have information on our web site about talking with kids about the war on terrorism, and how to prevent anger from leading to bias and hate (AboutOurKids.org).

It seems as though there are certain groups of children who might have particular fears or anxieties connected with the events of September 11 and their aftermath. What about children in military families, for instance?

For military families, in this new environment, children may be upset and worried about their parents' work where they weren't before. Like kids whose dads are firefighters, before they didn't worry about dads going to work, and now they are worried, it has taken on new meaning,

If there's a chance that a family member will be deployed, or if a family member is already deployed, there may be a need to explain that , for example, loving your country

and doing your duty doesn't mean you don't love your family. It can all seem so black and white and global, there's a need to personalize it to your family.

And of course they have to know they are not alone. Fortunately, for many families, the military community can provide that.

And what about children in Muslim families?

Many children in Muslim families may absolutely feel more ill at ease. Ideally, though, nothing happens in a vacuum. A girl who has worn a traditional headcovering for a couple of years, for instance, has already dealt with certain responses. She knows which people are in her support system and which aren't. These children have to understand diversity and tolerance issues in a different way…not to agree with any anger or discrimination that might come at them, but to understand why it is happening, and develop a reasoned response to it.

Many children expressed their responses to the September 11th attacks through art. The NYU Child Study Center and the Museum of the City of New York have sponsored a collaborative exhibit, The Day Our World Changed.
(http://thedayourworldchanged.org/index.html)

The California-Based Healing Art organization mounted their own show in Los Angeles earlier this year.
http://www.healingthruart.com/exhibits/children/

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